

Fun with the C.I.A.

The Night Watch

25 Years of Peculiar Service.
By David Atlee Phillips.
309 pp. New York: Atheneum. \$9.95.

By DAVID WISE

To hear David Atlee Phillips tell it, serving as a covert operator for the C.I.A. was a barrel of fun, a sort of free-floating panty-raid where the dirty tricks were played by the fellows in the frat house mostly on each other. Remember the time a Chief of Station in Latin America got drunk and stole the Ambassador's Thanksgiving turkeys? A real side-splitter. Or the 34-foot snake a C.I.A. man zipped up into a bag in Peru? Or the time when "Big Dave" Phillips was station chief in Rio and they had this party and poured champagne out the window?

Jeezus it was fun, and back in Washington the yarns made great telling when the boys gathered at Napoleon's, as they frequently did, and ordered another round of drinks. Sometimes it seemed there were so many pranks going on that the C.I.A. would get little things wrong. Like in September 1963, when someone named Lee Harvey Oswald turned up in Mexico City and visited the Soviet and Cuban embassies. David Phillips was working in the C.I.A.'s Mexico City station at the time, and he explains that the C.I.A. aide who cabled headquarters simply mixed up Oswald and another man who had visited the Soviet embassy. So the C.I.A. cable refers to "Lee Henry Oswald" and includes a totally inaccurate description that makes Oswald sound like a line-backer for the Oakland Raiders.

Still, for Phillips, a 25-year veteran of C.I.A.'s clandestine services, spying proved a rewarding and often pleasant career. Rio, where orchids bloomed by his house on the hillside, had been "pretty close to paradise." Then, abruptly, everything changed. In December 1974, Seymour Hersh revealed in The New York Times that the C.I.A. had been spying on Americans. Suddenly there was the Rockefeller Commission, the Congressional Investigations, a riptide of daily news stories, books criticizing the Justice Department poking around. C.I.A. employees got a memo from

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their legal counsel's office reminding them of their constitutional right to remain silent under the Miranda case. "The Miranda decision?" Phillips writes. "That was for criminals!" Clearly, it wasn't fun any more.

So in 1975 Phillips informed Director William E. Colby that he was resigning as chief of the Western Hemisphere Division to lecture and write in defense of C.I.A. and to form an association of former C.I.A. officers. The purpose, Phillips explained at the time, was to correct "erroneous impressions" and "snowballing innuendo" about the Agency. Phillips is now president of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers (A.F.I.O.), headquartered, as is C.I.A., in McLean, Va. Was all this—his lecturing, writing and the association—just another covert operation, funded by C.I.A.? Phillips strongly denies it, and perhaps he has indeed hung up his cloak and dagger, but *quién sabe?* That is one of the problems with a secret intelligence agency in a democracy; one never knows where covert operations begin and end.

In any event, Phillips makes a good publicist for the C.I.A. cause. He is likable, tall, breezy and ruggedly handsome in the manner of John Wayne, with whom he has sometimes been compared. Phillips is Marlboro man, almost the archetypal hero of a western movie. For more than two decades C.I.A. gave him a badge and a gun and told him to clean up Latin America.

He had failed as an actor, playwright and lecturer, but he was a success as a spy. In 1974, he writes, "After twenty-five years in secret operations I was promoted . . . to GS-18, the ultimate rank a C.I.A. officer can achieve . . ." For all of the glamour surrounding espionage, the C.I.A. is a bureaucracy. There are, as Phillips notes, a great many 3 x 5 cards to fill out.

When the C.I.A. was busy overthrowing a government, or trying to, Phillips was frequently there. He was in Guatemala in 1954 when C.I.A., with President Eisenhower's blessing,

toppled the government of Jacobo Arbenz. Next, he went to Havana, under deep cover as a "lecturer," to Lebanon as a "businessman" and then back to Washington in 1969, to take part in an operation designed to duplicate the Agency's victory in Guatemala. This time, the target was Castro's Cuba, and the invasion was to take place at a location on the south coast known as the Bay of Pigs.

By 1970, after posts as station chief in the Dominican Republic and Rio, Phillips was back in Washington as chief of the task force assigned to block the election of Salvador Allende as President of Chile.

Phillips's book is thus useful as a spy's-eye operational view, from inside, of events that often became spectacularly publicized. As broader history, it leaves a lot to be desired. The C.I.A. did in fact predict an uprising would occur after the Bay of Pigs invasion (that is not a "myth" as Phillips contends). The C.I.A. did its best to cover up Watergate, concealing vital evidence from the prosecutors for months. Adlai Stevenson—to my personal knowledge—was not wholly taken in when he read the C.I.A.'s Bay of Pigs cover story into the record at the U.N. And so on.

To Phillips's credit, he was, more than once, assailed by doubts during his clandestine career. When Nixon ordered C.I.A. director Richard Helms to overthrow Allende in 1970, Phillips felt it "inexcusable," since the Chilean President had been freely elected. Doubts he had, but not enough to quit; Phillips, by his own definition, was "a good soldier."

One retains the image of him sitting under a tree in his yard, and, as he describes it, alternately vomiting and downing martinis after the disaster at the Bay of Pigs. He is reassuringly human, and vulnerable. John Wayne never throws up. It had perhaps begun to dawn on Phillips that, although he had signed on as a sheriff for the Good Guys, they had turned out, more often than not, to be, the Bad Guys.